

Cultural Competence in the Classroom

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Judy Haas is a first year genetic counseling graduate student. Judy decided to attend this particular genetic counseling program because it offers a really great curriculum and many clinical sites. She also thought it would be fun to live in the Midwest for two years. Judy is from New Jersey, where she was born, raised and went to college.

Before the beginning of school, Judy had a couple of weeks to meet her classmates and get to know the city. Everything has been positive so far. It is now Judy's third week of genetic counseling training, and she is busy, but loving everything she's learning. She is especially excited to have been assigned to a Counseling Pre-Practicum section taught by a professor about whom she has heard only accolades.

The professor (Mary Benson, PhD) has 25 years of school counseling teaching experience and she really seems to enjoy having genetic counseling students in her section. Judy has been doing well in Professor Benson's class for the first few weeks, which is reassuring since Judy knows she has to miss three of the next four class meeting times due to Jewish holidays.

The last few minutes of this class were devoted to the first quiz of the semester. Judy was able to finish the quiz with confidence in the allotted time.

As Judy submits her quiz to the Professor, the following conversation ensues. About 6 other school counseling and genetic counseling students are within earshot:

Instructor: "Thanks Judy. I, uh, I know you told me about this before but, uh, how do I know that someone is religious? Like, uh, I know you told me you cannot be in class next week due to a Jewish holiday, but I have had other Jewish students in my class....They weren't genetic counseling students, but they always came to class."

Judy: (surprised/shocked by the comments...) "Oh, well, uh, I guess I thought we were all set. I spoke to you by phone this summer when I knew I would have conflicts due to the holidays this fall. You said we'd work it out..... Well, uh, to answer your question, I am Modern Orthodox. There are different denominations. Do I need a note from my rabbi or something?"

The Professor is then asked a question by another student about the quiz. The Professor turns her attention away from Judy.

Judy lingers for a few minutes, hoping that she will be able to resolve the issue with Professor Benson. However, the other student's issue is taking too long, and Judy has to catch the shuttle to get to her next class. She leaves with her classmate Jennifer.

Jennifer: "Wow, that was rude...."

Judy: “I thought so. How am I supposed to respect somebody who *teaches* us in class to respect all people no matter who they are, but then she doesn’t actually *do* it? I wonder about her 25 years of teaching experience...”

Commentary:

Bringing up the matter of Judy’s religious practices at the end of class (in public) was inappropriate for a number of reasons. It was the wrong time and place to discuss a personal matter that pertains only to Judy. The Professor put Judy on the defensive and caused her to feel different. While Judy may openly share her religious practices with others, she might not. She might prefer to keep her religion a more private, personal matter. The Professor did not seem to appreciate that her questions could make Judy feel uncomfortable. More importantly, this brief interaction around cultural differences set a negative tone for the student/professor relationship that could impact Judy’s ability to learn in this class or more broadly in the graduate program.

Cultural Competence:

What should Professor Benson have done to show cultural competence in the classroom? (List 5 things.)

Questions for Reflection and/or Discussion:

1. Do you agree with the students that the Professor’s expression of doubt about Judy’s true religious practices was “rude”? Why/why not?
2. Is the Professor’s skepticism justified based on past experience with students who have tried to get special treatment without valid reasons? How might the Professor’s past experience with Jewish students be relevant and useful to facilitate interactions with current students like Judy?
3. What differences might have ensued if Judy didn’t dress/look like all the other students (ie, if Professor Benson could tell that Judy was Modern Orthodox by visible characteristics)?
4. How could Judy’s respect for the Professor be restored?
5. Whose responsibility is it to work out how Judy can meet the course goals when she is unable to do work and attend classes on Jewish holidays?
6. What responsibility does the Professor have to know about Rosh Hashanah, or any other religious holidays, that her students might observe?
7. In general, what concessions are appropriate for an instructor to offer her students due to religious or other cultural practices? What limits should be set on the types and number of concessions? Who decides?

8. How might this interaction have been different if the holidays were at the end of the semester when Judy wasn't new to the city and the genetic counseling program?
9. How might the interaction have been different if the genetic counseling program was not located in the Midwest? Are geographic location and demographics relevant factors?
10. How often and why do you think dissonance can occur between cultural knowledge and their applications?
11. How might the dynamics of this classroom-based scenario relate to genetic counseling practice? Brainstorm an analogous situation involving a genetic counselor and her client.

Adaptations:

1. Show a photo of a young woman in jeans (Judy) as you present the case study.
2. Adapt the case study into a short videotaped role play exercise.
3. Ask students to identify the potential thoughts and feelings of the participants during the conversation.
4. Adapt the case to explore other religions; modify Judy's religious affiliation.
5. Ask students to identify and present resources on Modern Orthodox Judaism, and to comment on the personal and professional relevance of the information.
6. Ask students to present information about Rosh Hashanah and the Jewish calendar, and to comment on the personal and professional relevance of the information.
7. Faculty and students collaborate on reviewing the program syllabi and student handbooks to arrive at language that may be included in these formal documents. The following language may be useful in starting the review process:

Cultural Needs for Students

Please talk to (Professor Name) regarding any specific cultural needs you require during this course so that adjustments can be considered.

Disclaimer

The purpose of the Genetic Counseling Cultural Competence Toolkit (GCCCT) is to improve the delivery of culturally responsive, client-centered genetic counseling to diverse populations and to reduce health disparities. The GCCCT is an educational resource; any suggestions do not define the standards of clinical or educational practice. All cases and scenarios are hypothetical. The

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